Category: Narrative/Verbal Art

Telling and Being Told: Storytelling and Cultural Control in Contemporary Yucatec Maya Literatures

By Paul M. Worley. 2013. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 216 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8165-3026-7 (hard cover).

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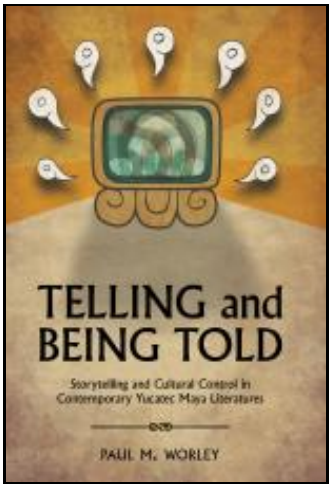

There is much in this study to interest folklorists, and much, as well, to arouse our indignation, or more usefully, to prod us into constructive self-reflection. For here is a book in which culture brokers are presented as imperialists whose intention is to silence indigenous voices, "folklore" is conceptualized as a parroting of dying traditions, and folklorists in the academy are said to miss the point that traditions are interpretive modes that empower the people who live them. The critique goes further: even the scholar who presents the narratives of indigenous peoples in their own voices is still controlling the agenda and hence depriving subjects of discursive agency. From such a stringent vantage point, we might question whether it is possible to do responsible ethnographic work on narrative traditions, but Paul Worley suggests that we can, and he models in this book his method of treating Yucatec Mayan storytelling as "a way of knowing" (96) and as a form of "ethnogenesis" (104).

It is tempting to dismiss Worley's charges as misdirected, and not difficult to turn his critique back on his own work, but I think we do better to inquire, from whence does this critique proceed, and how might we gain from closely attending to the framework that Worley sets forth as a politically and ethically defensible way to engage with indigenous cultures.

The origins of Worley's critique of culture brokers and folklorists lie in the complicated history of cultural encounter, colonialism, and nation-building in the republics of Latin America, where indigenous peoples and cultures have been variously suppressed, ignored, and exploited in the process of formulating the concept of a nation. Worley's account ranges from early documenters of indigenous cultures in Mesoamerica such as

Sahagún, to nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectors and scholars of Mayan narratives, and he finds in all of them the fatal flaw of imposing an outsider agenda on the indigenous materials. Even when intentions are good, these actors, says Worley, inadvertently silence the voices and blunt the agency of the people they document; at its most pernicious, this work deliberately falsifies the indigenous voice in the service of forging a national consciousness that locates indigenous populations in a fossilized past. The term "folklorization" populates this discussion, and for Worley, as for many in Latin America, "folklore" is always already a prettified, processed commodity.

Worley's survey of this significant Latin Americanist literature is not particularly charitable, but it is hard to argue with the conclusion that a good deal of scholarship on the region's indigenous storytelling has fallen short of the mark, either by not sufficiently engaging with people and circumstances, or by adapting the materials to external aesthetics and agendas. So what does Worley propose as a means of counteracting and reversing this lamentable trend? The tenets of the program he advances will in fact be familiar to most folklorists of our day, as they connect with procedures that have become standard in our field. They include provisions like these: paying heed to who says what to whom, treating storytellers as creative artists who can adapt traditional material to present concerns, taking note of the framing devices that storytellers use to strategically situate their stories, dealing with particular episodes of storytelling rather than generalized texts, looking closely at the language of the stories, taking into account the "epistemic violence" (136) of translation, and generally viewing storytelling as an interpretive act that helps constitute the ethos of the community.

Turning to the specifics of Worley's agenda, he proposes the term "oral literature" as best suited to the aura of living tradition he wants to evoke, setting aside the well-known difficulty of applying the term "literature" to materials that are orally produced. Explicitly preferring "oral literature" over "folklore," he argues that the former, unlike the latter, conceives of its producers as active subjects rather than as passive objects. At its base, Worley's embrace of oral literature is a stab at capturing authenticity, a quality that folklorists have found to be inviting, problematic, and elusive. Orality is a core concept in Worley's theorizing, to the extent that he sees the recent Mayan literary renaissance "destabilizing the prestige of the written word" (2), yet he doesn't deal in any depth with the techniques that might alleviate the problems of moving between the spoken and written word.

To observe Worley at work, we can see how he presents the texts, in English and in Yucatec Mayan (the latter in an appendix) of two stories told to him by a Maya storyteller, Mariano Bonilla Caamal, one a traditional tale involving the trickster Juan Rabbit, the other a contemporary story, "The Waiter and the Gringo," embodying a comparable reversal of power relations. Disputing the assignment of indigenous peoples to a domain of the past, he shows how these stories are reflective of a Maya modernity

and how the storyteller repurposes conventional material to actualize a Maya sensibility and comment on the political status of Mayan communities in Mexico. While it is not clear that Worley avoids the pitfalls of representing Mayan people, it is the case that the two stories and his discussion of them offer insights into the current moment on the Yucatan peninsula.

Paul Worley has crafted a useful treatise on the respectful handling of storytelling traditions. Setting aside his animus towards folklore and folklorists, there are lessons here regarding "performance as a way of knowing" (96) and "oral literature as a communal body of knowledge" (27), concepts that are portable to all of the contexts in which folklorists pursue their research. The Mayan *tsikbal* come to life as narratives that manifest an indigenous modernity, and results on this order are desirable for all of us working with stories produced and consumed in human communities.